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African Religion, Climate Change, and Knowledge Systems

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Abstract

This article argues that as humanity is now changing the composition of the atmosphere at a rate that is very exceptional on the geological time scale, resulting in global warming, humans must deal with climate change holistically, including the often overlooked religion factor. Human-caused climate change has resulted primarily from changes in the amounts of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, but also from changes in small particles (aerosols), as well as from changes in land use. In Africa, the entire relationship between humans and nature, including activities such as land use, has deep religious and spiritual underpinnings. In general, religion is central to many of the decisions people make about their own communities' development. Hence, this contribution examines religion as a factor that can be tapped into to mitigate negative effects of climate change, discussing climate change and religion in the context of development practice. It argues that some of the difficulties encountered in development, including efforts to reverse global warming in Africa, directly speak to the relegation of African cosmovision and conversely of the need to adopt new epistemologies, concepts, and models that take religion into consideration.

Climate change is a development issue because global warming is a threat to sustainable development. The earth's average temperature has increased, some weather phenomena have become more frequent and intense (such as heat waves and heavy downpours), and others have become less frequent and intense, like extreme cold events. Scientists have determined that human activities have become a dominant force, and are responsible for most of the warming observed over the past 50 years. However, climate change is no longer the monopoly of meteorologists and physicists who deal with concepts governing how the atmosphere moves, warms, cools, and precipitates, nor of

disciplines such as geomorphology and palaeontology. Christian religious actors involved in earth mission and earth-keeping ministries, such as Marthinus Daneel of the Zimbabwean Institute of Religious Research and Ecological Conservation (ZIRRCO),¹ have attested to this. African religion can do the same. The question has emerged whether it still makes sense to pray for rain knowing that droughts in Africa are related to weather events such as El Niño that are aggravated by anthropogenic climate change, an assertion that represents other similar interventions that question the relevance of religion and spirituality in a “scientificized” world. This article answers the question in the affirmative. It shows that African religious beliefs are a prime source of guidance and support for most people in Africa.

Increasing global temperature, rising sea levels, acidifying oceans, and other climate change impacts are seriously affecting coastal areas and low-lying coastal countries, including many of the least developed countries and small island developing states. The survival of many societies, and of the biological support systems of the planet, is at risk.² The United Nations Millennium Project’s task force on environmental sustainability recommended a series of mitigating measures, including investment in cost-effective and sustainable energy technologies, elimination of distorting subsidies favouring fossil fuels at the expense of renewable alternatives, the development of climate-friendly markets (e.g., carbon trading), targets for concentrations of greenhouse gases, and rationalized consumption and production patterns.³ Religion and culture as factors that can contribute to mitigating global warming are conspicuous by their absence in this list. The secular and reductionist international development agenda has, for the most part, ignored the fact that the majority of the world’s peoples do not view themselves simply as material beings responding to material exigencies and circumstances, but rather as cultural and moral beings concerned with spiritual aspirations and purposes.⁴

¹ M. L. Daneel, “Christian Mission and Earth-Care: An African Case Study,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35:3 (2011), 130–36, <http://www.internationalbulletin.org/issues/2011-03/2011-03-130-daneel.html>; E. Conradie, “Missiology and Ecology: An Assessment of the Current State of the Debate,” *Australian Journal of Mission Studies* 8:1 (2014), 10–16.

² United Nations, Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform (2017), <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/climatechange>.

³ D. Melnick et al., *Environment and Human Wellbeing: A Practical Strategy* (summary version), UN Millennium Project, Task Force on Environmental Sustainability, 2005.

⁴ Bahá’í International Community, *Science, Religion and Development: Some Initial Considerations*, 2001, <http://iefworld.org/isgprsd.htm>.

If development is to truly benefit the African people, it must reflect the cosmology and beliefs of local peoples.⁵ Existing strategies and programmes to address climate change fall short of taking into account the essential cultural, spiritual, or social dimensions of life so fundamental to human welfare, except when it has Western and/or Christian undertones. This might explain why Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* received much publicity worldwide.⁶ One aspect in line with the argument of this article that is raised by the Pope is that the environmental crisis is not only a scientific, political, and economic problem, but a moral and spiritual challenge. He also acknowledges the interconnectedness of human beings with nature.⁷ In Africa, religion is a crucial factor whenever people define, initiate, adopt, oppose, or circumvent development processes. Religion and spirituality are the substructure or foundation for understanding the social, cultural, economic, material, and political.⁸ They are central in shaping indigenous health, agriculture, and environmental beliefs and practices.

African Religion and Development

While there are specific geographic, ethnic, linguistic, and spiritual characteristics among peoples in Africa, African religion in general is the indigenous faith and practice of African peoples, which is the product of their perception, encounter, reflection upon, and experiences of the universe in which they live. Generally, the African world exists in two spheres – the visible, tangible, and concrete world of humans, animals, vegetation, and other natural elements; and the invisible world of the spirits, ancestors, divinities, and the supreme deity. Yet it is one world, indivisible, with one sphere touching on the other. Its specific elements are basically the belief in the existence of God and/or gods; the belief in spirits, both good and bad; and the belief in cultic prohibitions (taboos) and moral violations. Africans believe in sacrifices performed for various

⁵ J. McDonnell, "Challenging the Euro-Western Epistemological Dominance of Development through African Cosmivision," in *Emerging Perspectives on 'African Development'*, ed. George J. Sefa Dei and Paul Banahene Adjei (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 98–116.

⁶ Its economic justice concerns, however, have been attacked by free market capitalists and questions have been asked whether the Pope's love for the poor translates into concrete policy concerning the immediate problem of climate change. Moreover, the fact that global warming gas emissions have increased as the global population has increased calls into question the carrying capacity of planet Earth and also the church's teaching on birth control as it affects human population growth.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Encyclical letter Laudato Si' of the Holy Father Francis on Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

⁸ G. J. S. Dei, "Revisiting the Question of the 'Indigenous,'" in *Indigenous Knowledges and Critical Education*, ed. G. J. S. Dei (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 21–33.

purposes (e.g., warding off evils, securing ancestors' support, appeasing divinities and supernatural beings, and expressing gratitude), in the continuing existence of the dead in the invisible world (from which they can assist the living), and in judgment from God or from the dead.⁹ African traditional religion gives meaning and direction to its adherents. It is expressed in the way the Africans have always regulated their relationship with nature and with fellow human beings. As a result of this, in certain cases some animals may be regarded as sacred to devotees of a particular divinity; or natural phenomena such as trees, hills, or rivers may be deified.¹⁰

In this article, I refer to the case of the Shona people in Zimbabwe. The Shona people believe in the supreme being known as *Mwari*. They also believe in ancestors known as *vadzimu* who are, in the words of Mbiti, the "living-dead who live under the soil, own and control it."¹¹ These *vadzimu* exist on different levels, namely, familial and territorial. The Shona also believe in avenging spirits (*ngozi*) and alien spirits (*shavi*-singular, *mashavi*-plural); as well as sacred places (natural and human-made) and sacred practitioners, including the chief (*ishe*), spirit mediums (*masvikiro*), and traditional healers (*n'anga*). The Shona religion permeates all realms of the Shona people's life. It is their life, religion, and culture. To interact with their religion is to enter into their life and culture, and vice versa.

While this cosmological worldview is particular to the Shona, with slight variations it also runs across Africa. It is impossible to separate the life of an African from their religion; hence, early writers like Kofi Busia and John Mbiti were prompted to affirm the overly religious attitude of traditional African societies. Busia remarks that the African is "intensely and pervasively religious . . . in traditional African communities it was not possible to distinguish between religious and non-religious areas of life. All life is religious."¹² Mbiti asserted that "Africans are notoriously religious,"¹³ and B. E. Idowu stated that "in all things [Africans] are religious" and "for the African to be is to be religious."¹⁴ While these early writers might have exaggerated the religiosity of the African person, their statements serve to demonstrate how much religion is central in the

⁹ John. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford, U.K.: Heinemann, 1969).

¹⁰ See *Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The Role of Sacred Natural Sites and Cultural Landscapes* (Paris: UNESCO, 2006), <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001478/147863e.pdf>.

¹¹ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.

¹² K. A. Busia, *Africa in Search of Democracy* (New York: Praeger, 1967).

¹³ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.

¹⁴ B. E. Idowu, "The Study of Religion with Special Reference to African Traditional Religion," *ORITA: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* 1:1 (1967), 3–12.

African people's lives. As a result, anything that is done within an African context has a corresponding rite or ritual, or religious reasoning behind it.

African religion must not be perceived as a conservative cultural element that works to resist change and hence is a barrier to development. Each community practises religious observances that direct the lives of that community, and in other areas, cults are responsible for different developmental activities. Therefore, religious elements in the African people's cosmology have an effect on the process of development initiatives. Since religion is integral to understanding the world and one's place in it, it affects decisions: for instance, about who will treat a sick child, when and how people will plant their fields, and whether to participate in any risky but potentially beneficial social action. Just as social scientists and practitioners have recognized that gender, class, and ethnicity, while potentially conflictual, are integral components of people's identity and must be taken fully into account in development efforts, so too must they recognize religion, as it is also central to the life of the people.¹⁵

A fixed definition of development has always been elusive, as the definitions offered have either been too limited, too broad and vague, or too amorphous. This has led some scholars, such as Conradie, to ask provocatively whether it should be dropped altogether or be replaced by the term "maturation," which, while imperfect, allows for the fulfilment of potential and a certain directionality.¹⁶ Despite this challenge, the term "sustainable development" remains in vogue. Climate change and sustainable development cannot be placed in separate boxes, because development themes like land use (natural resources and agriculture), health, poverty (vulnerability), economic development (including trade and finance), and energy (supply, demand, markets, security) are climate connected.¹⁷ In the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, member states expressed their commitment to protect the planet from degradation and take urgent action on climate change. The agenda also identified, in paragraph 14, climate change as "one of the greatest challenges of our time" and worried that "its adverse impacts [would] undermine the ability of all countries to achieve sustainable development."¹⁸

¹⁵ K. A. ver Beek, "Spirituality: A Development Taboo," *Development in Practice* 10:1 (2000), 31–43.

¹⁶ E. Conradie, "Why Cannot the Term Development Just Be Dropped Altogether? Some Reflections on the Concept of Maturation as Alternative to Development Discourse," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72:4 (2016), 1–11.

¹⁷ Tariq Banuri and Hans Opschoor, *Climate Change and Sustainable Development*, DESA Working Paper no. 56 (New York: UN–DESA, 2007), http://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2007/wp56_2007.pdf.

¹⁸ Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform.

According to the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Report for 1996, “development has come to be understood as a multidimensional undertaking, a people-centered and equitable process in which the ultimate goal of economic and social policies must be to better the human condition responding to the needs, and maximizing the potential, of all members of society.”¹⁹ At the level of the individual, it implies increased capacity and skill, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility, and material well-being. Goulet distinguishes three basic components or core values of development as life sustenance, self-esteem, and freedom.²⁰ At a national level, development is measured in terms of gross national product, a measure of national income. The human needs approach conceives development as where the level of satisfaction of various dimensions of human needs is considered to have improved.

More recently, a concept of human development has come into vogue emphasizing aspects that go beyond the dominant economic dimension. The human development approach includes the spiritual dimension of life, in addition to low levels of material poverty and unemployment, relative equality, democratization of political life, true national independence, good literacy and educational levels, good health, relatively equal status for women and participation by women, and sustainable ability to meet future needs.²¹ The present-day discourse of development privileges the concept of sustainable development, which came into prominence in the World Conservation Strategy, presented in 1980 by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. The World Commission on the Environment popularized it through the study *Our Common Future* (1987). The most frequently quoted definition states that sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.²²

As a coherent practice, development began after the Second World War. It was built not only on the crumbling edifices of the war, but also on the legacy of colonialism that had entrenched patterns of domination and established the concept of the world as a single entity. In the post-war period of the 1940s, a liberal and secularist approach flourished, emphasizing the achievement of development through the adoption of

¹⁹ UNCTAD, *Trade and Development Report, 1996* (New York and Geneva: UN, 1996), 21, http://unctad.org/en/Docs/tdr1996_en.pdf.

²⁰ D. Goulet, *The Cruel Choice: A New Concept on the Theory of Development* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1971).

²¹ See A. Thomas and D. Potter, “Development, Capitalism and the Nation State,” in *Poverty and Development in the 1990s*, ed. Tim Allen and Alan Thomas (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1992).

²² United Nations, *Our Common Future, Chapter 2: Towards Sustainable Development*, <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm>.

Western economic systems and, as a result, an economic understanding of development dominated the debate during the 1950s; by the 1960s, it was epitomized in the modernization paradigm. Development was seen as a linear process in which a country moved from underdevelopment, which was characterized as backward/traditional/primitive, to full development, which was identified as modern/rational/industrialized.²³ Those who understand development to mean catching up with the material standard of living of the industrialized societies perceive the worldview of certain cultures and religions, especially those of Africa and other developing countries, as obstacles to this sort of progress. It is as a result of such perspectives that elements such as African religion have been overlooked, thus subsequently relegated to the margins. If anything, such spiritual elements were only seen as the cause of the “backwardness” of the African people. This marginalization took place on a number of different fronts, including the theological, sociological, and scientific.

Whither African Religion?

Reductionist theories on African religion were advanced by people such as Edward Taylor (1832–1917), often regarded as the father of British anthropology. He saw African religion and magic as primitive forces of science that must be replaced by Western science. James Frazer (1854–1941) attempted to explain away African religion using an evolutionary history of models of human thought – from magic, through religion, to Western science. He regarded magic as a primitive form of science based on assumptions that knowledge of the laws of the universe could be used to control events. However, he argues that magical thought uses a faulty logic based on the “law of sympathy” (by which like is supposed to influence like) and the “law of contagion” (by which things once in close contact are supposed to influence one another). French philosopher Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1857–1939) explained the religious and magical beliefs of the African people in terms of a “prelogical” mentality, one that does not always conform to the laws of logic. The law of contradiction is sometimes violated when “prelogical” thought operates according to the law of participation, according to which objects can be both themselves and something other than themselves.

Recent scholarship on decoloniality offers useful insights into the epistemological framework of these early anthropologists. Their epistemology of development and progress perceives African religion as barren of progressive technologies that can fashion progress and development. Decolonialists call this frame of thinking “coloniality of

²³ B. Haddad, “Theologizing Development: A Gendered Analysis of Poverty, Survival and Faith,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 110 (2001), 5–19.

knowledge,” understood as “a complex process of deployment of global imperial technologies of subjectivation taking the form of translating and re-writing other cultures, other knowledges and other ways of being, and presuming commensurability through Western rationality.”²⁴ Mignolo argues that coloniality of knowledge silences and relegates other epistemologies to barbarian margins, a primitive or a communist or a Muslim past.²⁵ Thus, the framework of coloniality of knowledge allows us to interrogate how colonial mentality interfered with African modes of knowing, social meaning-making, imagining, seeing and knowledge production through Eurocentric epistemologies that assumed the character of objective, scientific, neutral, universal, and only truthful knowledge.²⁶

Unfortunately, these deductions are faulty because they were not only based on the European Renaissance and Enlightenment, but also on ethnographic information collected without taking into account the social context. These authors never came into contact with the people they were writing about, even though observation is key in research if writing about people.²⁷ When the early explorers and writers on Africa focused their attention on the religion of the African people, they made entries in their journals, and these entries did not go beyond references to places, objects, or personages. Indigenous religious materials, especially ritual objects and symbolic forms, particularly caught their eye because of their exotic nature. They did not witness the religious temples, churches, or mosques, and hence they raised serious doubts as to whether the Africans had any religion at all. African religion as a result has been misrepresented, underestimated, and stigmatized. As a consequence, people’s beliefs and the priorities arising from them, their religious celebrations, their sacred sites, their way of organizing their communities and making decisions are all seen as peripheral to development issues. Efforts, in fact, are made to ensure they are done away with and replaced with sound scientific thinking. Mezzana concludes that this mechanism would also prevent perceiving the spiritual, cultural, and human energies that are essential to the search for an African modernity for the continent’s development.²⁸ References to the early anthropologists may sound anachronistic in a debate on the current question of climate

²⁴ S. J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).

²⁵ W. D. Mignolo, “Introduction: Coloniality of Power and De-colonial Thinking,” *Cultural Studies* 21:2/3 (2007), 449–514.

²⁶ A. Escobar, “Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise: The Latin American Modernity/Coloniality Research Program,” *Cultural Studies* 21:2/3 (2007), 197–210.

²⁷ M. F. C. Bourdillon, “Theories in the Understanding of African Traditional Religion,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (1975), 38–39.

²⁸ D. Mezzana, *African Traditional Religion and Modernity*, <https://www.abibitumikasa.com/forums/showthread.php/38068-African-traditional-religions-and-modernity>.

change. This is not the case, because the empire that facilitated colonialism has not faded away. It still exists, and at its centre is a modern world order that is best described as racialized, colonial, capitalist, patriarchal, hierarchical, asymmetrical, imperial, hetero-normative, hegemonic, Christian-centric, and Euro-centric.²⁹

Modernity, which has been associated with development, is often associated with new ideas and has been linked with Christianity on the basis that, as J. Platvoet puts it, African religions, as a group or type of human religion, are the oldest of humankind.³⁰ As a result, Christianity is seen as a “new” religion that resonates with modernity. As such, Christianity was considered an exception in theories that censured religion. With its working ethics and ideologies, which were metaphors of a privatized economy, Christianity was looked upon as a dynamic factor promoting modern development, and to many people in the developing world, conversion to Christianity was a first step to civilization. This being the case, development has tended to be aligned with either Western or Christian slants, neither of which recognize African religion. Those with scientific and materialistic tendencies also fail to give African religion an opportunity or serious consideration. Social science literature, upon which much of the development literature is based, has historically tended to refer to spirituality and religion as belief systems based on myths, whose negative effects on society would be replaced eventually by sound scientific thinking. Thus development agencies have also avoided spirituality and religion, and according to ver Beek’s analysis, organizations have no policies to deal with religious issues in their programmes.³¹ Such a background has given rise to the marginalization of African Traditional Religion in discourses on religion and climate change.

The Environment Is the People and the People Are the Environment

Caring for the environment and the climate is not something foreign to the peoples of Africa. Human motivation in such caring has always had religious and spiritual roots. Walter Rodney confirms the influence of the African superstructure influencing the development on the ground when he states,

²⁹ W. D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Renaissance: Literacy, Terrorty and Colonization* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1999); W. D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs, Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); A. Quijano, “The Coloniality of Power and Social Stratification,” *Journal of World Systems* 6:2 (2000), 342–86; S. J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization* (Dakar: CODESRIA Books, 2012).

³⁰ J. Platvoet, “The Religion of Africa in the Historical Order,” in *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects*, ed. Jan Platvoet, James Cox and Jacob Olupona (Cambridge: Roots and Branches, 1996), 46–102.

³¹ K. A. ver Beek, “Spirituality: A Development Taboo.”

[E]ach element in the superstructure interacts with other elements in the superstructure as well as with the material base. The religious belief that a certain forest is sacred was the kind of element in the superstructure that affected economic activity, since that forest would not be cleared for cultivation ... it is also to be borne in mind that peculiarities in the superstructure of any given society have a marked impact on the rate of development.³²

African religion functions in symbiosis with the rest of our human faculties; hence those combating global warming toward sustainable development should incorporate it and not jettison it. African religion is important in that it enhances development by generating a sense of self-confidence. It gives meaning and direction to the practitioners. It is a source of dynamism and creativity. What matters most is the capacity of religion to generate self-respect and the ability to resist exploitation and domination, as well as to offer meaning to what people produce and consume, to land, life, liberty, life, death, pain, and joy.

As McDonnell argues, in line with the nature of the African cosmovision or cosmology, “relationships between nature and humans, spirit and nature are not dichotomized or compartmentalized, but are integrated into an interdependent system of existence that is tied together through spiritual interactions.”³³ Since the epistemology of the African cosmovision sees the physical and spiritual worlds as integrated, this initiates a “profound respect and reverence without exploitation” for nature³⁴ and a commitment to conserve and enrich nature.³⁵ This means that nature and the environment are part and parcel of life, or one with the people, because there is no separation. To destroy nature and environment is to destroy oneself. Living in harmony with the natural world translates to living in harmony with the spiritual world, as they are interconnected and codependent.³⁶ Thus, natural phenomena such as plants, rocks, and bodies of water are

³² W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1972).

³³ J. McDonnell, “Challenging the Euro-Western Epistemological Dominance of Development through African Cosmovision,” in *Emerging Perspectives on ‘African Development,’* ed. George J. Sefa Dei and Paul Banahene Adjei (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 98–116.

³⁴ See Y. Turaki, *Foundations of African Traditional Religion and Worldview* (Nairobi: WorldAlive Publishers Ltd., 2006), 95.

³⁵ G. J. S. Dei, “Learning Culture, Spirituality and Local Knowledge: Implications for African Schooling,” *International Review of Education* 48:5 (2002), 335–60; A. Mazrui and T. Wagaw, “Toward Decolonization Modernity: Education and Culture Conflict in Eastern Africa,” in *The Education Process of Historiography in Africa* (Paris: UNESCO), 35–62.

³⁶ B. Haverkort and C. Reijntjes, eds., *Conference Proceedings. Moving Worldviews: Reshaping Sciences, Policies and Practices for Endogenous Sustainable Development*, <http://www.bibalex.org/Search4Dev/files/416884/362466.pdf>. C. Gonesse, R. Tuvafurem, and N. Mudzingwa, “Developing Centres of Excellence on Endogenous Development,” in *Ancient Roots, New Shoots*, ed. B. Haverkort (London: Zed Books, 2002), 169–80.

respected and revered, acting as vehicles to the spiritual world, and having both visible and invisible powers.³⁷ This automatically ensures that nature and the environment are protected. This stifles global warming, thus paving the way for sustainable development. Furthermore, as animals are understood as being a part of a larger spiritual system, they are respected and not killed unless in self-defence or to provide immediate sustenance or sacrifice. Moreover, non-living elements, such as rain, are also deemed as sacred and as powerful spirits, as they are needed to sustain life. Rainmakers, in their ability to solicit the spirit world and call up or cease rainfall, are seen as vitally important to the health and well being of the community.³⁸ Thus, at the foundation of the African cosmovision lies a deep reverence and respect for the natural world. Human beings are seen as being spiritually connected to all that happens within the greater frameworks of nature.

Religion in this case is not about upholding a transcendent, and alien, ideal for the transformation of the world, but primarily an immanent, this-worldly, and local model for the production and reproduction of human society in an immediate natural environment. Not to do so will destroy the animating point of the community, for this is the source of energy and commitment. Religion is not an addition to life, but it permeates all aspects of life. It contains the meaning of life and what constitutes good life. It is the matrix, the software of social life, and its symbolic engine. The religious awareness of the African people is not an abstraction, but a living component of their way of life.³⁹ One African proverb states, “Our world is like a drum; strike any part and the vibration is felt all over.” When a borehole is sunk, it rings in the ears of the ancestors, the owners of the land.

African religion informs the way adherents regulate their relationship with both nature and fellow human beings. The way an African relates to the soil upon which development agencies erect buildings, sink boreholes, carry out farming, and the way they relate to water and sanitation issues, to health issues, and to other development issues, cannot omit African religion. This way of undertaking activities may seem absurd in the eyes of Christians and Westerners, but it is full of meaning for Africans. It not only has the psychological and social functions of integration and equilibrium, but also a numinous constellation with practical implications such as ensuring the protection of the environment, which is desperately needed in the contexts of global warming. Religion is the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.

³⁹ Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, “Christian Witness to People of African Traditional Religions,” Lausanne Occasional Paper 18, 18 June 1980, Lausanne Movement website, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-18>.

guiding influence for political, social, and family life. It is neither an abstract principle nor even a collection of such principles, but a leaven that makes principles work, vitally involved as they are with the religious laws and ceremonies, which give external expression to this vitality. Religion is profoundly integrated into social and technical life.

African Religion as the Panacea to Development and Climate Change?

The preceding argument is not to suggest that African religion is the panacea for development and climate change, given the challenges associated with practical implementation. A question is often raised: How can African religion be included in a model for action that sets objectives at the beginning and uses quantifiable data?⁴⁰ African religion is not something quantifiable. Other religions, such as Christianity, can be quantifiable, since they are missionary in nature. For example, after every baptism in the Catholic Church, the priest enters the names of the newly baptized in the baptism register. In this way, the number of people in the church can be a quantifiable measure of the growth of the church. This is not the case with African religion. Thus, African religion risks being relegated because of the difficulty of including it in a model. But one can ask whether it is necessary to count, and whether counting is the only way to establish growth and effectivity.

Another problem experienced in African religion is the sense of fear that it causes: “A sense of fear, arising mainly from constant threat of ‘principalities and powers’ on the ontological ‘balance’ which primal man has to maintain if he is to survive. On a practical level, it is the fear of illness and death – hence the preoccupation with ‘protection’ (charms, anti-witchcraft medicines, etc.).”⁴¹ Practitioners of African religion believe that they can do nothing without blessing from the ancestors or traditional healers. It could be a simple journey or something small: there is a lack of confidence and commitment until and unless rituals have been carried out. All socio-economic and political activities thus require religious approval: either from the ancestors or traditional healers. Such engagement tends to depict the African as inherently lacking human power.

If African religion is not the panacea and the Western/Christian epistemology is also faulty, then what is the way forward? The decolonial turn recommends a pluriversal approach to the pursuit of knowledge. A pluriversal, as opposed to a universal

⁴⁰ World Faiths Development Dialogue, *Cultures, Spirituality and Development* (Oxford: World Faiths Development Dialogue, 2001), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/berkeley-center/20010822culturespdev.pdf>.

⁴¹ Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, “Christian Witness to People of African Traditional Religions.”

approach does not privilege one knowledge system at the expense of another. Instead, it provides an equal distance to all knowledge systems toward knowledge production and dissemination. Thus the argument here is not to move from one end of the spectrum, where Western/Christian knowledge systems are privileged, to the other, where African knowledge systems become privileged. Preventing climate change will not come through knowledge predicated on universal modes of thinking. These have proven to be unable to deal with contemporary problems like climate change that they have produced. A pluriversal approach is where many worlds fit toward other worlds.⁴²

Conclusion

The abovementioned difficulties with African religion are not meant to overturn the argument. It remains imperative for climate change approaches in Africa to take note of the influence of African religion. Integrating religion can help in acquiring a less reductive and all-embracing approach. All climate change advocates, therefore, have to make special efforts to integrate African religion from the earliest stages. Integration refers to respect and acknowledgement of the religious beliefs of the people to ensure their programmes are not antagonistic to the beliefs of the people. It is important to take stock of the belief of the Africans from the start so that the whole programme will have a firm foundation. Achieving this develops a sense of self-confidence and mutual trust. This will lead to increased participation, responsibility, and economic efficiency and more sustainable poverty reduction.⁴³ The programmes will be based on people's vision. Unless the vision to address climate change is articulated by those for whom it is intended, it cannot inspire and sustain a people. Any climate change enterprise must begin by considering how people's full range of resources, including their spiritual or religious resources, can be used for their general well being.

⁴² S. J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).

⁴³ World Faiths Development Dialogue, "Cultures, Spirituality and Development," 22 August 2001, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/publications/cultures-spirituality-development>.